*Also by Maurice Richardson*

EXPLOITS OF ENGELBRECHT
THE FASCINATION OF REPTILES
LITTLE VICTIMS

# *Fits & Starts*

## Collected pieces by Maurice Richardson

*Introduction by Julian Symons*

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MICHAEL JOSEPH

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# *Author's Foreword and Acknowledgements*

This collection of short stories, reportage, essays and reviews covers the last forty years. I do not think any further comment from me is needed.

My relations with editors have been almost entirely harmonious, often euphoric. I should however like to express particular thanks to Richard Bennett, Editor of *Lilliput* 1947–50; to David Astor of *The Observer*, to my old friend, Terence Kilmartin, his literary editor – also to the late Viola Garvin, Terence's predecessor; and, more recently, to Willy Landels of *Harpers & Queen* and his infinitely sympathetic assistant editor, Ann Barr. I must also thank John Gross of *The Times Literary Supplement* and his assistant editor, Mary-Kaye Wilmers – she of the therapeutic personality – for feeding me with books to review on which I could spread myself.

1978

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# Introduction

One of the attractive, although at times infuriating, things about Maurice Richardson was that he embodied in himself so many contradictions. A prime example can be found in his attitude towards luxurious living. True luxury, of the Edwardian kind that implies excess, was a way of life into which he sank with the ease of somebody entering his natural element. Read the loving account in *Douceur de Vivre* of the breakfast table at Ernest Mocatta's house, which contained 'dishes of sole, salmon kedgeree, fried eggs, scrambled eggs, kidneys, a blushing York ham, a glazed tongue', all, as he says, 'for two of us only and Ernest never ate more than one boiled egg.' But excess means waste, and one of Maurice's many selves disapproved of waste, so that he was for years a member of the Communist Party which stood – among other things – for the elimination of Mocattan luxury.

Many other contradictions made up his complex personality. He drank a great deal and then went on the wagon, taking no liquid but soda water. He was a sceptical humanist fascinated by freakish religions, and even more by the odd characters connected with them, like Aleister Crowley the self-styled Beast 666, and the Yorkshire Yogi, Dr Alexander Cannon, both of them described here. A believer in the healing powers of psychoanalysis, he was himself a difficult and unrewarding patient; an intellectual whose 'reading was very wide, his versatility formidable' as he says of Baron Munchausen's biographer, Rudolf Erich Raspe, he had also the journalist's magpie quality of pecking quickly at a subject and flying away. He was a persistent teller of autobiographical tales, among them luncheons with Beast 666, Irish misadventures with Professor Dawkins and a lively East End evening with Virginia Bath, yet he remained in many ways

a man resolutely reticent about his own personality and beliefs.

My own friendship with Maurice was warm but not deep. We met first in the course of some Soho pub evening before the War, and saw quite a lot of each other for a period of ten years or so ending in the middle fifties, after which we met much less often. We had in common a devotion to crime stories and to real life crime, but in addition Maurice was a splendid pub companion, full of good stories which began realistically but spiralled up into fantasy. The stories in the Profiles section of this book are admirably told, but they are still only shadows of his conversation at its most vivid. He had a sense of style in relation to clothes and conversation, as well as in his writing, and the kind of charm in talking to women that makes them feel that their appearance is of even more interest to their companion than what they are saying.

Maurice had a chunky, broad-shouldered boxer's build (he had been in fact a good amateur boxer), and when I first knew him looked distinctly like the American player of tough parts, Chester Morris. Later, when he put on weight, his features took on a Churchillian cast – Randolph, not Winston. His boiled blue eyes, slightly protuberant, had often a glare or glaze of what looked like hostility. I have known people who found him frightening, and there is no doubt that he could be aggressive in the company of those he disliked or found boring. He shared this aggressive quality with his friend John Davenport, who is mentioned in one of these pieces, and also appears fictionally in the first of them as a headkeeper, described accurately in relation to the real Davenport as 'a powerful man with a figure like a sawn-off Hercules.' John must have held the record for being thrown physically out of London clubs. Maurice could not have matched this, but had trouble enough while in his cups. I never myself had any greater difference with him than a brisk exchange of verbal abuse in which he called me an academic prig and I said that he was a snob fascinated by the rich. Both accusations had, I daresay, elements of truth.

I can see that I am in danger of putting in 'what is known in the trade as the Acid Drop', as Maurice wittily puts it in a short article about obituary habits. But I take heart from his endorsement of a Cromwellian 'warts and all' approach in the



last line of that article, and in Maurice's case nobody would write truly about him without taking some account of his shortcomings. *The Times* could find nobody ready to write an orthodox anonymous obituary notice, and publishers and editors particularly needed all the tolerance at their command in dealing with him. Maurice was a manic depressive, and by all accounts could be awkward to deal with when manic, and simply unproductive while in deep depression. Editors suffered emotionally, publishers financially, at his hands. The list of those who made advances on books he never produced would have to be numbered on more fingers than ordinary humans possess.

That was the dark side, the side on which idle, luxury-loving Maurice might say how detestable it was for a gentleman to be pestered by literary tradesmen. The compensations are expressed by the pieces in this book, which testify to the fact that Maurice was the most imaginative and most wide-ranging literary journalist in Britain. He was interested in anybody and anything unusual, and had remarkable powers of sympathy in talking to burglars, boxers, wrestlers. He could empathise with everybody except Mr and Mrs Everyman. He was fascinated by snakes and insects, and by any other natural phenomenon that enlarged his knowledge of human behaviour.

At his best he was also a brilliant observer and analyst. Nobody has written better, more perceptively and less sensationally, about the Moors Murders, has pinned more certainly the barrack-room lawyer quality in Brady, or examined with equal skill the subtleties of the Brady-Hindley relationship. The piece is so good that one is left wishing he had written a book about the case. But although Maurice wrote more between covers than is generally known, including three novels, the recently reprinted science fiction stories called *The Exploits of Engelbrecht*, an account of his experiences in the Fire Service and a short book about prep school life, his talent was most truly expressed in the article written to order and with a deadline, and in his weekly articles on TV and his crime reviews.

My only regret about the present excellent collection, which ranges back over rather more than the forty years mentioned in the foreword – 'Way Out in the Continuum' I think appeared in *Horizon* during the War – is that it includes no TV

or crime pieces. Maurice invented the telegraphically brief crime review, and practised it brilliantly. I suppose these very short pieces with their stunning similes would be out of place in a book, but there are longer pieces about Ambler and Simenon that would be worth reprinting. And the wit and style of his TV reviews transcends the ephemeral nature of what he called the repertory of rot.

His attitude towards the square eye in the living room was typically ambivalent. Part of him disapproved the time wasted, his own time and that of others, on pernicious or mind-rotting rubbish; another part was fascinated by the rubbish and devoted to it, as some people treasure the badness of truly bad films; and a third Maurice applauded TV as informer, liberator, potential influence in raising mass standards. The combination was unique, and the high standard of TV criticism in Britain today is at least in part because of his example. Perhaps another selection of reviews and articles – I have the impression that there is plenty to choose from – will prove the point.

I last saw Maurice a few years back, when we met unexpectedly in a Westminster street. He advanced on me with a wide smile on his face, and his arms flung out in greeting. His death last year, at the age of seventy-one, came at the house of a friend where he was staying for a weekend. One of the several publishers he knew came over, and found him in fine conversational form. Maurice had wanted to see him particularly to talk about a book for which he had signed a contract. They agreed to change the book for another title, which the publisher felt fairly certain would also not be produced. Maurice went cheerfully to bed. His host took up a cup of tea in the morning, and found him dead. He had suffered a coronary in the night. It was a peculiarly appropriate easing out of life for one whose character and beliefs were, upon the whole, so deliberately Epicurean.

Julian Symons

# *Short Stories*

from his brain. There is something very Teutonic about this rather ponderous little absurdity, but what distinguishes it from an original Raspe anecdote is the fact that it is the Baron who is put at a disadvantage. That Raspe would never have allowed. The distinction between a genuine Raspe story and an imitation is plain enough even when he himself is borrowing wholesale. Take, for instance, his use of the familiar Beanstalk, which he prefaces by a typically nonsensical incongruity about two bears chasing a bee for its honey.

It remains to say something about the illustrations. The Baron has been depicted by various hands, including, it is said, that of Raspe himself; by Rowlandson, the brothers Cruikshank, and – in a French version 'liberally expanded' by Théophile Gautier – by Doré. In an English edition of the nineties he even appeared in Bearsleyish guise. It is a pity that Mr Wood's woodcuts to this admirable edition, though attractive pieces of decoration, should so completely miss the malevolent, sparkish element which is essential to the whole conception and should present us with an insipid little puppet suitable only for a Christmas card.

# *Luncheon with Beast 666*

I have never been able to understand how anyone in his right mind could begin to take Aleister Crowley seriously. I had seen him several times over the years; and had heard his strange, rather cockneyfied nasal voice in bars, intoning, 'Triple absinthe, please', when asked what he would have to drink; and once, at the Eiffel Tower, saying to Stulik, the proprietor, 'I trust Lady Dean Paul hasn't been putting cocaine into your soup today'. But I did not meet him until 1939.

I had written a review of some Soho rapscallion's autobiography, Ironfoot Jack, I think, he was called, and ended it by saying: 'He reminds one of a more agreeable Aleister Crowley in a minor way of business.' Crowley wrote on his phallic-headed writing paper to protest: 'Perhaps in future before you pass animadversions on my character you will take the trouble to make my acquaintance.' I thought this was fair enough and telephoned him. He seemed pleased, and asked me to luncheon. 'I shall not be too hard on you, Mr Richardson.'

He was living in a furnished flat high up in a house on the borderland between Pimlico and Belgravia. He opened the door himself. He was wearing a suit of green plus-fours and an enormous tartan bow tie. It was an ensemble that suggested the music-hall stage rather than the golf course, but I made the appropriate comment. 'I used to be plus 4 at Hoylake', he said. It was typical of him to overdo it. If he had said his handicap was 4, I might have believed it, knowing that he had his sporting side, and I would have been impressed. But plus 4 at Hoylake was altogether too much.

Crowley was sixty-four. His once athletic physique had become blurred by fat. He was bald as a stone, and his huge expanse of naked hairless yellowish face was faintly suggestive of an enormous penis, which is no doubt why the adjective

'obscene' has often been applied to it. His eyes protruded like gooseberries. The only comparable eyes I have seen were those of J. L. Garvin, the formidable editor of *The Observer*. It was difficult not to keep staring at them, though the hypnotic effect clashed with the tartan bow tie.

He poured me out a large glass of vodka and turned on the gas fire, one of those self-lighting ones. 'Magick', he said, as it popped into flame. 'Is not that magick, Mr Richardson?' He pronounced 'magick' with the 'k' at the end. He made little jokes about magick all through lunch. I think he had taken my measure as a rationalist sceptic, not to be conned by mumbo-jumbo, but capable of being charmed by jocular eccentricity.

Luncheon was brought in after several more glasses of vodka by his housekeeper, a Scots lady so indeterminate as to age, status, and nubility that she seemed like one of those anthropological reconstructions with 'conjectural parts in black.'

'Kathy, say Will with me', said Crowley. He began to recite his well-known slogan, 'Do What Thou Wilt Shall Be The Whole Of The Law. Love Is The Law, Love Under Will.' I joined in politely. 'Hurry up, Aleister,' said Kathy, 'the potatoes will be burnt.'

The first course was a lobster bisque. Pointing to the scarlet tip of a crustacean appendage sticking up out of the beige soup, Crowley said: 'Looks like a devil roasting in hell, does it not, Mr Richardson?'

The diabolical bisque was followed by roast duck, then a deliquescent brie. We drank several litres of tolerable white chianti. Kathy brought coffee, Jamaica Blue Mountain, which Crowley made in a Cona with much muttering and incantation for my benefit, a bottle of Cyprus brandy that would take the shell off an egg, and strong black Mexican cigars.

I can't recall the conversation in any detail. Crowley spoke slowly with long pauses in between sentences, words, even syllables. I distinctly remember him saying that D. H. Lawrence knew nothing about women because he was homosexual and that Freud knew even less. Getting back to magick, he said it was his duty to protect the gullible, the oh so gullible public, from the depredations of rival occultists like Major Yeats Brown and Dr Alexander Cannon. I wanted to clap. At some



time or other I know I started on a diatribe about fear being the root of all evil.

It was five o'clock and we had drunk a great deal of brandy. Crowley for me was now just a benevolent old freak. I said how much I had enjoyed myself and I was sorry to have animadverted on his character. There was just one thing, said Crowley: could I, would I, do him a great personal favour and write him a little note of apology? He handed me a writing-block and his fountain pen, which was inscribed 'Baphomet' in gilt lettering. I found I was too drunk to write. 'Mr Crowley', I said, 'your hospitality has overwhelmed me.'

In that case, said Crowley, since it had been such a happy encounter could we repeat it in a week's time? I said I should be delighted and made my way unsteadily down the stairs.

I had every intention of writing Crowley some sort of apology but a knowledgeable friend forewarned me. 'For heaven's sake,' he said, 'how can you be such a mug? If you write any apology for what you said in print, that's admitting liability. He'll take it to a solicitor and he'll bung in a writ. They won't get much, of course, probably settle out of court for a couple of hundred, but it won't do you any good with your paper. That's what the lunch was all about.'

At the next lunch there was another guest, Gerald Hamilton, famous as the original Isherwood's Mr Norris. He and Crowley were old friends. They had lived in the same house in Berlin. Hamilton told me later that they had each been paid some very small sum by British Intelligence for reporting on each other's activities. This was the first time I had met Hamilton, though I had heard about him and knew him by sight. His appearance, with another bald head and naked face of quite exceptional ugliness, was as unforgettable as Crowley's. I suppose he was there in the role of consultant con man.

Vodka, food, wine and brandy were as profuse as before. Hamilton paid elaborate compliments to Kathy and her cooking. Crowley brought up the subject of Berlin and *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. He assured me that 'the real Mr Norris, my dear Mr Richardson, is a far more vicious person. Now, if I were a real magician, I would be able to produce him for you at this table, would I not?' Hamilton muttered nervously. I did not let on that I knew.

We went on drinking brandy until late in the afternoon. Again I was asked to write a note of apology, and Baphomet and the writing-block were produced. Again I pleaded intoxication. I saw Hamilton shaking his head. 'But next time, Mr Crowley', I said, 'you must have lunch with me.'

I had arranged to meet Crowley at the York Minster in Dean Street. He arrived, preceded by an overpowering smell as of an old-fashioned operating theatre. This, he told me, was his daily eye-opener, half a pint of ether. He was dressed like a duke in a musical comedy in swallow-tail coat and sponge-bag trousers. Asked what he would drink, he answered automatically: 'Triple absinthe, please.'

It was summer and war was getting very near. Various dug-outs from the Kaiser's war were starting to appear unexpectedly. One of these, a genial naval captain in uniform, greeted Crowley: 'Aleister, old top! I haven't seen you since the days of the Ragged Ragtime Girls!' These, I learnt, were a troupe of English violinists and dancers, whom Crowley had managed on a tour of Tsarist Russia in 1914. They opened up vistas of an improbable swinging Crowley phase.

Two more triple absinthes followed the first. At luncheon in the Escargot he ate three dozen snails, wild duck pie, and camembert, drank a bottle of burgundy and several brandies. The cigars weren't strong enough and a waiter had to be sent out for his favourite black Mexicans. We parted on the friendliest terms, and that was the last I saw of him. Once by way of a Christmas card he sent me a book entitled *Little Essays Towards Truth* by 'Baphomet'. I found it incomprehensible. I did not know then that Crowley had been a heroin addict for some time and was on the Home Office list. He was to survive on his customary diet of rich food, large quantities of the strongest possible drink and tobacco, and dangerous drugs galore, to the age of seventy-three. His physique must have been exceptional. And here, I am convinced, lies an important part of the explanation of the Crowley phenomenon, that curious combination of manic paranoid charlatan and mystic mountebank. Crowley was a perfect example of what the American typologist William Sheldon calls over-endowment, both physical and temperamental. He was carrying too heavy a load. As for his blood stream . . .



Another aspect of Crowley, which people are apt to overlook, is that when you got used to his eccentricities, and so long as you were not impressed by his mystical pretensions, he was apt to become a fearful bore. He had no capacity for selection, no notion of when to stop. How sinister was he? Obviously he would con a mug, pluck a pigeon. He treated those unfortunate consorts of his, the Scarlet Women, abominably. He is said to have had a nasty streak of cruelty. Isherwood told me a story of Crowley in a Berlin night club gratuitously raking a boy's chest with his talons. I can only say I found him quite amiable. I have never believed in his magical powers, even though I did once hear Nina Hamnett, a fairly hard-headed person in most respects, warn a young man: 'You be very careful if you have anything to do with AC, my dear. He once made fire come out of my studio floor, my dear.'

Somerset Maugham met Crowley, as he explains in his introduction to later editions of *The Magician*,* which was first published in 1908, in Paris in 1897. Crowley was then twenty-five. He was introduced to him at a restaurant in Montparnasse by Gerald Kelly, whose unfortunate sister, Rose, Crowley later married. Maugham took an immediate dislike to him, but gave him credit for being a man of parts: first-class mountaineer, champion chess and whist player. 'He was a fake but not entirely a fake.' He dismisses his poetry, quite rightly, as inferior imitation Swinburne. He does not mention Crowley's short stories. Some of these had merit. One in particular about the daughter of a puritan evangelical bank clerk who brought home from her art class a statuette of the Venus de Milo with appalling consequences, is extremely funny.

After their Paris meetings Maugham saw no more of Crowley, though years later he got a telegram from him: 'Mother of God and I starving. Aleister Crowley.' When *The Magician*, in which Crowley figures under the name of Oliver Haddo, appeared, Crowley reviewed it in *Vanity Fair* and signed his review 'Oliver Haddo.'

The style of *The Magician* is apt to be, as Maugham himself says, 'lush and turgid with many more adjectives and adverbs than I should use today'. You can detect the influence of his

* W. Somerset Maugham: *The Magician* (Heinemann, *hardback*; Pan Books, *paperback*).

master, Maupassant, of course, but there is a profuse inlay of ninetyish romanticism. What does surprise one, is that he should have given his chief character supernatural powers, so that what might have been an interesting case history turns into an occult shocker, and a crude one at that.

Oliver Haddo is very closely modelled on Crowley; almost the only physical difference is that he is much taller. Otherwise he is Crowley to the life, though viewed sensationally. His clean-shaven face has 'a disconcerting nudity', also 'the look of a very wicked sensual priest'. His glance is 'uncanny' and 'looks straight through you'.

Another strange thing about him was the impossibility of telling whether he was serious. There was a mockery in that queer glance, a sardonic smile upon the mouth which made you hesitate how to take his outrageous utterances. It was irritating to be uncertain whether, while you were laughing at him, he was not really enjoying a joke at your expense.

At the beginning of the book, Haddo is an entertaining grotesque. He insists on ordering his dinner backwards, tells a preposterous and typically Crowleyan story about his lion-shooting exploits. Soon, however, his magical powers assert themselves. At a fair, he is bitten by a snake-charmer's viper; he mutters an incantation over his wrist and comes to no harm. A foil to Haddo is Dr Porhoet, a benign student of magic and the occult who acts as a kind of chorus. Maugham must have done a lot of reading, for he covers the whole field very thoroughly from Paracelsus to Eliphas Levi.

The plot turns on Oliver Haddo's revenge on Arthur Burdon, a young surgeon engaged to Margaret, an English art student who finds Haddo infinitely repulsive. When her dog bites Haddo, instead of muttering incantations, he kicks it savagely. Arthur knocks him down. Haddo gives him a look of 'inhuman malignancy, satanic hatred', but he apologizes for kicking the dog and slinks away.

Next day Haddo pretends to have a fainting fit outside Margaret's flat. She takes him in and he proceeds to put a spell on her, beginning with a recitation from Pater. She becomes his slave and starts using strong acrid oriental scent. 'It was as though fiends of hell were taking revenge on her loveliness by inspring in her a passion for this monstrous creature. She



trembled with the intensity of her desire.' A few days later she elopes with Haddo.

After this the story starts to collapse. Margaret tries to break away from Haddo, and is helped by the faithful Arthur, but Haddo lures her back. She dies mysteriously. Finally, Arthur, Dr Porhoet and Margaret's friend Susie break into Haddo's country house in England, taking various occultist precautions. They find Oliver Haddo strangled, and several bottles full of homunculi in various stages of atrocious liveliness. 'Was it for these vile monstrosities that Margaret was sacrificed in all her loveliness?', asks Arthur, before setting fire to the house. I suppose you could say that the last laugh was with Crowley for inspiring Maugham to write such rubbish.

Incidentally, I wonder what has become of little Aleister Akhnaton Crowley? I remember, now, that Crowley showed me with paternal pride a photograph of this infant at our first luncheon. He was sitting on a rock at Mousehole. He should be thirty-nine today, an age of significant mystical potency, I believe.